

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology; that is, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, in our last session we emphasized the importance of salvation. Our greatest need is not for anything in this life, our greatest need is to be saved from eternal hell, which we all deserve because of our rebellion against God. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I first want to introduce some more precise terminology. The term salvation refers to the whole process by which we are saved from eternal hell and ushered into heaven in our glorified bodies on the Day of Judgment. But there are a number of steps involved in our salvation.

Marc Roby: And theologians often refer to those steps by the Latin phrase, *ordo salutis*, which simply means the order of salvation.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, and we will get to every item on that list, but I want to begin by focusing for a few minutes on one item in the middle of that list, which is justification.

Marc Roby: Which refers to God's legal declaration that we are just, or righteous in his sight.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. We need to picture a heavenly courtroom. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:10 that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."<sup>1</sup>

Marc Roby: And the verdict that is rendered in that courtroom seals our eternal destiny. We read in Matthew 25:46 that Jesus said the wicked "will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Dr. Spencer: Which is why we made the point in our last session, as you reminded us in your opening comment, that our greatest need is to be saved from eternal hell. In other words, we need to be justified. Therefore, the first thing I want to do today is look at what it takes for us to be justified in God's sight.

In order to be justified, we have two problems that must be solved and which we are utterly incapable of solving ourselves. First, the debt we owe because of our sins must be paid. God is the perfectly holy and just judge of the universe and sin *must* be punished.

Marc Roby: That is not a popular idea today. Many, if not most, people would prefer a God who simply forgives our sin. To require punishment sounds primitive to many people in this day and age.

Dr. Spencer: People may prefer such a god, but he doesn't exist. As I said, God is just and must punish sin. And if that idea sounds primitive to some of our listeners, I would ask them to

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consider a question. Suppose that you have a young daughter and she is brutally raped and murdered. Would justice be satisfied if the man who did it simply said “I’m sorry”?

**Marc Roby: Yes, I don’t think most people would say that saying sorry is sufficient to pay for such a horrible offense.**

Dr. Spencer: And, more importantly, neither would God. Forgiveness is possible if there is true repentance, but justice still demands that the sin be punished and we all have an intuitive sense of the truth of that statement.

**Marc Roby: I see your point. But you said we have two problems, what is the other one?**

Dr. Spencer: Our second problem is that we need perfect righteousness. God cannot declare us to be just without perfect righteousness. I want to focus on this second need first.

Jesus commanded us in Matthew 5:48 to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In other words, we don’t just need to be better than someone else in order to be justified, and we don’t just need to be in the top 10% of moral people, or anything like that. God’s standard is perfection.

**Marc Roby: And, of course, many will object that it is unfair of God to have a standard that we can’t meet.**

Dr. Spencer: Many will say that, but it isn’t unfair because it was possible for Adam to meet this standard in his original state. He was our representative before God as we discussed in Session 106. And we all, as his descendants, inherit both his guilt and his sinful nature, which is why we all, without exception, sin.

**Marc Roby: The idea that we inherit Adam’s guilt and sinful nature is known as the doctrine of original sin, which we first mentioned in Session 105.**

Dr. Spencer: And the wonderful news of the gospel, is that God did not leave us in that sorry condition. The central feature of the history of man is God’s working out his plan of salvation to take care of our sin problem. History is linear and has a predetermined end. When God has finished saving all those whom he is going to save, Christ will come again and, as we read in 2 Peter 3:10, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” And then, just a few verses later, in Verse 13, Peter tells us, “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

**Marc Roby: That is a wonderful promise, and I look forward to that home of righteousness. We should point out though that this idea isn’t something new in the New Testament. God had already revealed his plan in the Old Testament. We read in Isaiah 65:17 that God said, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”**

Dr. Spencer: And God had also revealed through Isaiah that this glorious new creation will endure forever, along with eternal hell. We read in Isaiah 66:22-24, ““As the new heavens and

the new earth that I make will endure before me,' declares the LORD, 'so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,' says the LORD. 'And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.'”

**Marc Roby:** This again makes clear the eternal importance of salvation. There are only two eternal destinies and all of us, as rebels against God, deserve to be in hell, where “their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

Dr. Spencer: And God progressively revealed his solution to our sin problem throughout history. It began with the curse pronounced on Satan in the Garden. In Genesis 3:15 we read that God told Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

**Marc Roby:** Yes, that is called the protoevangelium, meaning the first gospel. Jesus Christ figuratively crushed Satan’s head when he accomplished our redemption on the cross.

Dr. Spencer: And this protoevangelium was followed in time by God giving man a sacrificial system, which pointed to our need for a substitute to bear the wrath of God, which we deserve for our sins. It was also followed by the moral law, which, as we pointed out in Session 58, has three uses. First, because of our inability to keep it, it shows us our need for a Savior. Second, the punishments serve as a deterrent to sin. And, thirdly, the law serves as a model to show us how God wants us to live.

In addition, God gave many prophecies about the coming Messiah and the redemption he would accomplish for his people.

**Marc Roby:** And those prophecies are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: They are. It is also important to note that it is clear in the Old Testament that salvation comes from God, we don’t earn it. God tells us a number of times that he alone is our Savior. For example, we are told in Isaiah 45:21, “Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.”

**Marc Roby:** It would be impossible to be clearer than that.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And, in addition, God tells us how he will save us. We read in Ezekiel 36:25-27 that God said, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

**Marc Roby:** That is a wonderful promise. And it also speaks to the radical nature of our depravity, which we discussed in Session 108 when we presented the biblical doctrine of Total Depravity. Because of our total depravity, we need nothing less than a new heart.

Dr. Spencer: And our heart refers to the core of our being. Our mind, will and affections. In other words, all that we are as human beings. We are *not* as bad as we could possibly be, but we *are* sinful in every aspect of our being. In Jeremiah 17:9 we are told, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

**Marc Roby: That doesn't sound good. If our hearts are beyond cure, then it would appear that there isn't any hope.**

Dr. Spencer: And that is true humanly speaking, but what is impossible with man is possible with God as Jesus told us in Matthew 19:26.

The radical nature of the change is also clearly illustrated by the figure of speech used in the New Testament. In John 3:3 we read that Jesus told Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” And then again, in John 3:5, we read that he added, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

**Marc Roby: Being born again, which is also called regeneration, obviously refers to a radical change. And it reminds me of what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, these are all very important verses, and we have covered most of them before, but it is important to once again remind ourselves of just how serious the problem is. It is especially important to understand our total depravity, that there is no part of our being that is unaffected by sin, or we will not properly understand the biblical doctrine of salvation.

In Ephesians 2:1-2 the apostle Paul wrote, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

The biblical view is that we were spiritually dead. We weren't just sick, or in need of a little help to be better. We were dead.

**Marc Roby: And Paul's language is completely consistent with Christ's statement that we need to be born again.**

Dr. Spencer: It is, the Bible is consistent in all that it teaches. Prior to being regenerated by a mighty work of God, we were spiritually dead. We were still physically alive of course, but we were enemies of God. Paul also wrote in Romans 8:6-8 that “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

**Marc Roby: Paul doesn't paint a very flattering picture of unregenerate human beings. They are disobedient, hostile to God, unable to submit to his laws and controlled by their sinful nature.**

Dr. Spencer: The great 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian John Murray summarized the problem in the following way. “If this is man's condition in sin, then there can be no pleasure in the will of God.

Enmity against God must express itself in opposition to every manifestation of his holy will. How then can we expect that man will answer with delight the call to enter into God's kingdom of glory and virtue? How can a man dead in trespasses and sins, and at enmity with God, answer a call to the fellowship of the Father and the Son? How can a mind darkened and depraved have any understanding or appreciation of the treasures of divine grace? How can his will incline to the overtures of God's grace in the gospel?"<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby: Yes, Murray makes a strong argument for the reformed view that we must be born again before we can repent and believe.**

Dr. Spencer: And his argument is entirely biblical. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We need nothing less than new birth. We need new hearts. And dead people don't raise themselves to life. God must do the work first.

The biblical doctrine of justification flows inexorably from the biblical doctrine of total depravity. There is no part of our being that is unaffected by sin, and so it is impossible that we will ever choose to repent and believe in Jesus Christ if left on our own.

**Marc Roby: And total depravity is represented by the first letter in the acrostic TULIP, which we have discussed before. It is often used to describe reformed theology.**

Dr. Spencer: It is. And, just to remind those listeners who may not be familiar with this acrostic, in addition to the 'T' standing for total depravity, the 'U' stands for unconditional election, the 'L' stands for limited atonement, the 'I' stands for irresistible grace, and the 'P' stands for perseverance of the saints.

We have noted before that one can certainly argue that better terms exist for some of the doctrines. And, in addition, these five doctrines do not fully define reformed theology. For example, they don't mention the Creator/creature distinction, which is central to reformed theology. But this acrostic is very important in discussing the biblical doctrine of justification, and the five points all hold together logically. As I said, we can't properly understand the biblical doctrine of salvation if we don't first understand that prior to being born again we were spiritually dead.

**Marc Roby: And, therefore, morally incapable of saving ourselves.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. In his excellent short summary of Reformed theology R.C. Sproul wrote that "If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP," and the aspect he is referring to is our moral inability, then, "the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic."<sup>3</sup> And we will see that this is true as we dive into the biblical doctrine of justification.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 169

<sup>3</sup> R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 128

Marc Roby: Which I very much look forward to doing, but we are out of time for today. So, I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org), and we will be sure to respond.